Support The Guardian
Available for everyone, funded by readers
Contribute → Subscribe →

Simona Halep's power and belief help her realise Wimbledon dream

The Romanian's work on her mentality as well as groundstrokes paid dividends as she dismantled Serena Williams

▲ Simona Halep stuns Serena Williams to win first Wimbledon title – video report

Sean Ingle *at Wimbledon*
@seaningle
Sat 13 Jul 2019 19.56 BST

76 206

It took 56 minutes into the biggest match of Simona Halep's career for her legs to go finally wobbly. But at that point her opponent, Serena Williams, was shuffling towards the net, head bowed and hand outstretched. And Centre Court was rising and roaring to salute a performance of staggering intensity.

Watching on it seemed impossible that when Halep was a young child in Romania she used to cry before going on to court because she was so shy. Yet on the game's biggest stage the tiny introvert was transformed into a lion with ice in her veins, producing a near-faultless display to dismantle the greatest women's player in history.

Serena Williams pays tribute to 'little powerhouse' Halep after final defeat

Read more

"It's tough to describe the moment," she said after a 6-2, 6-2 victory in which she hit three unforced errors. "You just feel light. You feel everything is beautiful. I'm very sure that was the best match of my life."

This made her the first Romanian to win here, although Ilie Nastase got close in 1972 before losing 7-5 in the fifth set to Stan Smith, and she was rewarded with £2.25m in prize money and lifetime membership of the All-England Club. It also fulfilled a longtime promise. Halep's mum once told her that she if wanted to do something in tennis she had to play in a Wimbledon final. "It was my mum's dream when I was about 10," she said, smiling. "And the day came and my mum is here to see it."

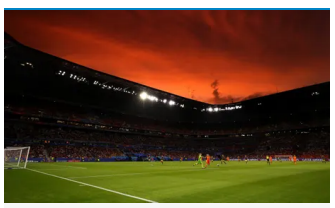
Yet when Halep finally wended her way through Wimbledon's burrows and corridors to catch up with her mother she found her too dumbstruck to speak. "She didn't say anything because she was crying," said Halep. "I just hugged her and I kissed her. I knew she's very emotional."

The 27-year-old has long been regarded as the best mover in the women's game but she has always regarded grass with a natural clay-courter's suspicion. Indeed when she was asked when she started to truly think that winning Wimbledon was possible she was blunt. "Today," she said. "I'm very honest. I never thought that I would be able to win on grass, with all these players that are very tall and serving with a lot of power. But this year I started to feel the game more and more. I started to feel safe on court, which helped me a lot to believe."

Belief has not always been the strongest part of her game. Two years ago she lost a French Open final from being a set and 3-0 up, and she had also lost two other grand slam titles before winning in Paris last year. Such setbacks would have crushed many, but instead it only strengthened her resolve.

▲ Serena Williams congratulates Simona Halep after the Romanian's dominant victory on Centre Court. Photograph: Tom Jenkins/The Observer

“Those finals I lost in the past helped me for this moment,” she said. “It’s never easy to face a grand slam final. You can get intimidated by the moment. You can get nervous, too nervous.”



The Recap: sign up for the best of the Guardian's sport coverage

Read more

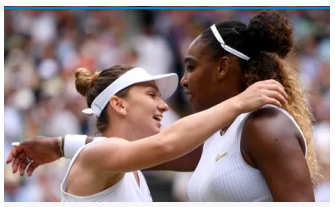
Not this time. Halep had lost nine of her 10 matches against Williams but on Friday she spent 30 minutes practising her returns, knowing that she had to face down the American’s barrage to have any chance of getting into the match.

It worked and then some as Halep broke into the opening game and then again to go 4-0 up after 11 minutes. Wimbledon was stunned, but not half as much as Williams. Afterwards the Romanian was asked what she was thinking at that point. “Nothing,” she replied.

In the past two decades dozens of opponents have felt what it is like to suffer a Serena attack and be a set down before settling into the match. Now Williams was getting a taste of her own medicine and did not know how to respond.

The pattern continued in the second set - with Halep’s superior speed and waspish groundstrokes allowing her to get Williams’s cannonballs back with interest until she had forced the error.

With every minute the match went on Williams, who was short of fitness after playing seven tournaments all year, was being stretched out of her comfort zone and away from victory.



Simona Halep stuns Serena Williams to win first Wimbledon title

Read more

"I have always been intimidated a little bit when I faced Serena," Halep said. "She's an inspiration for everyone. But I decided before the match that I'm going to focus on myself and on the final of grand slam, not on her. That's why I was able to play my best, to be relaxed, and to be able to be positive and confident against her.

"I knew that I had to be aggressive, being 100% for every ball, that I can't let her come back in to the match because she's so powerful and so strong."

Even when she was serving for the match Halep was calmness personified. "I looked at the scoreboard. I said: 'OK, it's 5-2, it's real.' Then I just played every ball. I didn't think about the score at all."

Then in a great and wondrous rush it finally hit her. She was Wimbledon champion.

More people in Romania...

... like you, are reading and supporting The Guardian's independent, investigative journalism than ever before. And unlike many new organisations, we have chosen an approach that allows us to keep our journalism accessible to all, regardless of where they live or what they can afford. But we need your ongoing support to keep working as we do.

The Guardian will engage with the most critical issues of our time - from the escalating climate catastrophe to widespread inequality to the influence of big tech on our lives. At a time when factual information is a necessity, we believe that each of us, around the world, deserves access to accurate reporting with integrity at its heart.

Our editorial independence means we set our own agenda and voice our own opinions. Guardian journalism is free from commercial and political bias and not influenced by billionaire owners or shareholders. This means we can give a voice to those less heard, explore where others turn away, and rigorously challenge those in power.

We need your support to keep delivering quality journalism, to maintain our openness and to protect our precious independence. Every reader contribution, big or small, is so valuable. **Support The Guardian from as little as €1 - and it only takes a minute. Thank you.**

Support The Guardian →

Topics

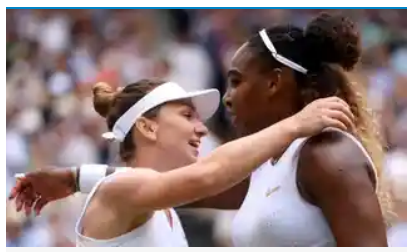
Wimbledon 2019 / Sportblog

Serena Williams / Simona Halep / Wimbledon / Tennis / US sports / features

more on this story

'I had no time for emotions': Halep on her fearless defeat of Williams

14h

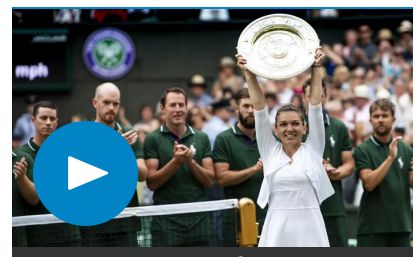


Simona Halep stuns Serena Williams to win first Wimbledon title

18h 923

Serena Williams pays tribute to 'little powerhouse' Halep after final defeat

15h



Simona Halep stuns Serena Williams to win first Wimbledon title - video report

1:13 15h

Halep storms past Williams to win Wimbledon title – as it happened

16h

"So, guys, you reckon you could take a point off Serena Williams? *Alex Clark*

14h

A duel with no secrets but does Roger Federer have greater shock potential?

12h 112

Dylan Alcott wins at Wimbledon to secure fourth straight grand slam

13h

comments (206)

Sign in or create your Guardian account to join the discussion.

Guardian Pick

It was an incredible match, and Halep entirely deserved the championship.

But I want to congratulate Serena Williams too. At 37, having coped with injuries and illness at various times (particularly a very difficult pregnancy and birth), she did really well to get to the final.

And both of them fought hard to get there.

Guardian Pick

Great win for Halep. Resilience, fortitude, and power. But I don't see the need to belittle Serena. She could be pompous at times, whiny at others, but she has turned out decades-worth of a terrific gladiatorial performance for crowds who enjoy dumpster fires more than the appreciate the finesse. Are you not entertained?!

Jump to comment

Sometimes it's a real pity that only one can win.

Jump to comment

Older_woman
6h ago

10

Vladimir Svetlov
7h ago

6

+ View more comments

Most popular

Football Cricket Rugby union **Tennis** Cycling F1 Golf US sports

News | **Opinion** | **Sport** | **Culture** | **Lifestyle**

Sign up to our daily email

Email address Sign up

Contact us
Complaints & corrections
SecureDrop
Work for us
Privacy policy
Cookie policy
Terms & conditions
Help

All topics
All writers
Digital newspaper archive
Facebook
Twitter

Advertise with us
Search UK jobs
Dating
Discount Codes

Support The Guardian
Available for everyone, funded by readers

Contribute →
Subscribe →

Back to top

© 2019 Guardian News & Media Limited or its affiliated companies. All rights reserved.